

Reflection on Feminism in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract—*Jane Eyre* is a famous work written by Charlotte Bronte on the basis of her own experiences. In this novel, the author shapes a tough and independent woman who pursues true love and equality. Jane Eyre is different from any other women at that time. She strives for her life and defends her fate in hardships and difficult conditions. In Victorian period, the image of Jane Eyre cast a sharp contrast to the man-dominated society. She stands for a new lady who has the courage to fight for her own rights and love. By analyzing the contemporary social, historical and cultural background of Victorian period and key points of feminism, and Jane's experiences, this paper points out that Jane gradually becomes a feminist in pursuing independence and equality and true love.

Index Terms—*Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte, feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Bronte (1816—1855) is an English novelist, the eldest of the three Bronte sisters whose novels have become enduring classics of English literature. *Jane Eyre* is widely acclaimed as her masterpiece.

Bronte sisters grew up in a poor priestly family. Their mother died of lung cancer when the children were very young. As there was no sunlight in the depths of winter, the children's childhood was desolate and without joy. Fortunately, their father, a poor learned priest, he himself taught them reading, and guided them to read newspaper. This would be a relief in the midst of sadness. Because of the miserable life, Bronte sisters had spent a childhood in charity school. These experiences offered the available materials for the prospective creation.

Our heroine Jane Eyre is an orphan, and is ill-treated at a young age. She strives for her life, and forms a tough character. She learns how to live from her childhood's environment. Also just for her growing experiences, it creates her strong personality, beautiful ideal and wisdom. Jane Eyre is a special image out of ordinary. She makes a life by herself, and dares to show her own voice. Under the pressure of life, she always maintains her self-respect by hard work, intelligence and tough individualism. She never gives in on her way. Though she has little figure, Jane Eyre is huge in soul. She pursues true love and is loyal and steadfast to her beloved man. Her kindness, intelligence, and independence attract the hero. At last she gets a perfect love.

This thesis includes three parts. The first part is literature review which contains the research of *Jane Eyre* and my understanding of *Jane Eyre*. The second part is about the background of Victoria period and the general idea of feminism. The third part analyses the formation of Jane's character in three parts, the time when Jane is at her aunt's home and the Lowood boarding school, the time when Jane as teacher in Thornfield and has a relationship with Rochester, and after leaving Rochester meets St. John. Then we can analyze what Jane has done as a feminist through four aspects, her pursuit of esteem, independence, equality and true love. In the guidance of feminist beliefs, through her persistent and brave rebel and pursuit, Jane Eyre finally gets esteem, independence, equality and true love she aspires after for a long time. At last, I will explain the profound and lasting meaning of this novel and Jane herself.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

When the famous work *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte was first published in 1847, it had a great influence upon the society at that time. For a long time, numerous readers favored the image of Jane Eyre very much. *Jane Eyre* is the first, also the most powerful and popular novel to represent the modern view of women's position in society. Since its publication, many people have reviewed it from different perspectives.

Pat Macpherson points out in the book *Reflecting on Jane Eyre*, "*Jane Eyre* is marked by strong romantic elements and the role of nature is especially important" (1983, p.297-302). The work is infused with romantic spirit: the emphasis on the sensitiveness of the mind and the intense sensibility to changing nature (as in Wordsworth's poetry); the longing for adventure and the insistence on liberty, independence, and the right of the individual soul and self-fulfillment (as in Byron's and Shelley's poetry). After a stranger destroyed Jane's wedding, Jane left. Exhausted and penniless, she thinks of nature as the "universal mother". Wang Guofu, author of the *Literary Theory of Feminism*, says: "Jane Eyre embodies a new conception of women as heroines of vital strength and passionate feelings" (1987, p.225-229). In Victorian times women did not have important status. Until the last decade of the 19th century, almost the only occupation open to women was teaching as schoolmistress or more likely serving as private governess in a family. So when Charlotte had her books published, she had to use pseudonyms, pretending she was a male writer, Currer Bell for Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* was a representative work reflecting women's call for equality. Zheng Kelu's *Charlotte's Feminist Declaration* discussed, "During the Victorian Age was men-centered and men-controlled times. Women were

discriminated against by men at that time. However, the ahead-of-age female consciousness of Jane Eyre, the main character challenges men's authority." (1999, p.167)

This paper unfolds here from a different perspective concerning women's self-realization, esteem and choices to society or marriage. It helps readers to realize the importance of independence and to be enough to fight for their basic rights as human beings. Furthermore, the paper makes it clear that women are equal as men no matter in personality, economy, or social status.

III. BACKGROUND OF CREATING *JANE EYRE*

A. *Victorian Period*

Jane Eyre was created in the Victorian period. Contrasting to time, the Victorian literature period coincide with queen Victoria who were in power from 1836 to 1901, this period is the most brilliant history of Britain. In Victorian period, the society is man-controlled and man-dominated, and women are subject to the voice of men.

It is impossible for a low-status woman to have a decent life or a good marriage. The social structure determines the social position of a person. Women are discriminated in the patriarch society. Also, in this period, the female writers take the pens to speak for the oppressed women and *Jane Eyre* comes to be the most influential novel.

1. Influence of Economic State on Feminists

At the beginning of Queen Victoria in power, the Great Britain faced speed-up development of economy and serious social problems. After publishing *The Reform Act*, the political power turned to a newly developed industrialized capitalism. Sooner, the Industrial Revolution poured out, kinds of technology development brought new power to the economy of England, such as trains, steamboats, textile machines, printing machines and so on. England became the world factory, and gained a lot of wealth through expanding markets worldwide and grabbed resources in its colonies. In the middle of nineteenth century, the Great Britain became the first powerful country in the world in economy. But under this glory is the sharp conflict in society. Eventually, through 1836 to 1848, the famous Chartist Movement broke out. The working class published *The People's Charter* and asked the government to guarantee rights of human, improve living and working environment. This movement swept almost every city. Though it was down in 1848, the movement still got many achievements. Thanks to the movement, the working class awoke.

In the following twenty years, the Great Britain was stable. The middle class was respected and people pursued a warm, self-respect, modest and patriotic spirit. Meanwhile, the Queen Victoria is the example of these characters. With these new thoughts, literature became diversified.

At that time, for Jane, as a member of the lowest class, she is always looked down upon by those potentates with money and power. For people like her, they have no dignity; the rich can treat them at random and need not bother to give them any esteem. But Jane Eyre never surrenders to those snobbish people who despise the poor and the weak parochially and ruthlessly. In her whole life, she plunges herself into struggling for esteem which in her mind is deserved by any human being rather than a privilege for the wealthy people. She puts all her strength to get the respect and admiration from people around.

In those days of Britain, a female, like the noble Miss Ingram, is expected to seek a decent life through marriage and a wealthy husband. However, undoubtedly, it is based on the status and fortune of her family. For Jane, a plain and poor girl, how can she change her destiny and gain happiness? "Feminist once been raised: women's status in society is defined by some special society and culture power that can be challenged and changed" (Heather, 2003, p.146). In every relationship, Jane rises from inferiority to superiority, and finally gains full independence through continuous struggle.

2. Feminists' Voice on Literature

Victorian literature as the part of Victoria period has many features. It is complicated and multidimensional, which consists of huge changes among romance and reality. During this period, many genius of literature grew up as world moving. No matter in the form of novels, poems or essays, writers began to face the current situation and do advanced work.

In this situation, seeking for equality is another important theme through Jane Eyre's struggle for self-realization as a feminist. People in Victorian age have the idea that people are not born equally, people in high rank despise people in low rank and men are superior to women. Consequently, women like Jane are treated unequally in every field. When Jane realizes the unfair situation, she rebels constantly for the basic right of equality. It well reflects Jane's resolution and persistence in struggle for self-realization as a feminist woman.

Also the biggest theme in the book is true love. In all Jane Eyre's life, the pursuit of true love is an important representation of her struggle for self-realization. Love in Jane Eyre's understanding is pure, divine and it cannot be measured by status, power or property and so on. Having experienced a helpless childhood and a miserable adolescence, she expects more than a consolable true love. She suffers a lot in her pursuit of true love. Meanwhile, she obtains it through her long and hard pursuit.

Literature in the Victorian period truly reflects the reality and spirit of that time. The power, reality towards society, humor with kindness and boundless imagination are all beyond any time. In any aspect of literature, works are ready to welcome the new century.

B. *Feminism*

1. Outline

Feminist theory in the final analysis is to achieve gender equality in all of humanity. All feminist theory has a basic premise, which is, women worldwide are under an oppression, discrimination, and hierarchy state. The secondary status of women is so common, so lasting. In such a cross-historical and cross-cultural social structure prevalent among women in the political, economic, cultural, ideological, knowledge, ideas, ethics and other fields are in an unequal position with men, even in a private sphere of family, women are also in a position of inequality with men. Feminism in the patriarchal gender order is neither common, nor is it never changeable, because it is not natural by social and cultural human construction.

At different times and different culture, men are oppressive, and they belong to a class or classes as a member of the oppressive. Women are different, and they are simply neglected for being women or the oppressed.

2. Setting

Feminism is linked to women's liberation movement.

Women's liberation movement can be divided into two phases:

The first stage early, probably around the late 19th century, women's liberation movement of the first wave, was focused on contention in the requirement of gender equality among men and women, which is gender equality. It was also asked in civil and political rights, against aristocratic privilege stress. Men and women in intellectual ability have no difference. The most important objective is to fight for political rights, which is often called the feminist movement.

The second women's liberation movement, in general, is from the 60 years-70 years during the 20th century. It is believed as the earliest origins in the United States. This campaign continued until the 80's. The tone is to eliminate gender differences. In fact the difference between the sexes as in relations, women are subordinate to men based. Requirements are open to the public in all areas, and so on. Beauvoir's *Second Sex* is produced in this period.

The second feminist movement has brought about another result which is for gender studies, feminism and the rise of academic research. Therefore, there are all kinds of schools of feminism. For a long time, a sense of male-centered social ideology is the main stream in the community. So people in this concept of ideology is that they formed from the male point of view to describe the world, and to confuse the truth of this description, which is, this description is true, it is unalterable. They have become accustomed to those people in some of the concepts and challenges.

Although there exists a lot of schools, the basic point is that the struggle for gender equality, changing the status of women and being discriminated against oppression.

3. Impact of Feminism on Western Society

Most feminists take a holistic view of the political course of action, and they believe any place where injustice is a threat to all manners. It means a threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Therefore, some feminists usually go to support other social movements, such as civil rights movement, gay rights movement, and the recent father rights movement. Meanwhile, many black feminists such as Belle Hooks, criticized the feminist movement dominated by white women.

Feminists claim that women under the disadvantages are usually the situation of women in Western society, but the lives of women and blacks do make no sense. This concept is the key to post-colonial feminist point. Many black feminists would prefer a woman Doctrine as a term to express their views.

Sometimes, cross-sex feminist movement would keep alert distance, because the latter challenged differences among men and women. Cross-sex persons with gender identity as female transsexual will be excluded from certain female only beyond the occasion and will be excluded by some other feminists, because they think that a person born to men and can not truly understand the oppression suffered by women. This view has been criticized for the cross-gender sexual phobia, and discrimination on gender diverse persons is another face of heterosexism and patriarchal oppression.

Some feminists argue that the efforts in these areas where there are still many needs, but some do not agree, and even claimed to win this fight.

Feminism in the West has made many important social impacts, including voting rights to women; more equal wages; the initiative for divorce and no-fault divorce; the right to safe abortion and sterilization; the right to obtain a university education and so on.

Many English-speaking feminists support the use of gender-free language, such as Ms refers to all married and unmarried women, or gender is not clear when the use of he (she) or she (he) specified and not just uses he. Feminists also support the use of language which contains two of the elements, such as using humanity to replace mankind. Feminists want to change the use of language, not the hope that women have equal rights to obtain influence in the political discourse. It can be seen as changing the sex discrimination element of the language of the attempt, many with important examples of male color, such as the use of "he" to referring to the babies. Feminists believe that language directly affects the concept of reality.

In the post-colonial feminism, language does not receive the same attention as Western countries, because many non-Indo-European languages have no gender grammar.

Feminism is not recognized by the general mainstream of academia, and to the birth to all, without careful consideration, because of the lack of any depth of analysis, and everyone will be so accordingly issued to the public announcement of the theory, suffering from all walks of life, such as psychiatry, sociology, economics and education of modern academic criticism. In addition to religious and moral conservatives, the critical school of sociology also holds

the undermining women's rights activity as one of the main structures in modern society.

IV. FEMINISM IN JANE EYRE'S STRUGGLING FOR SELF-REALIZATION

A. *Pursuit for Equality and Independence*

Jane lost her parents when she was young, and thanks to her uncle Jane could live a good life, but unfortunately her uncle died after a few years. Her aunt, Mrs. Sarah Reed, regarded Jane as a jinx and her three children (John, Eliza and Georgiana) neglect and abuse Jane. They dislike Jane's plain looks and quiet yet passionate character. These only relatives of Jane Eyre do not show any sympathy or care to this pitiful little girl, instead they always criticize and bully her. Cold and disparaging, Aunt Reed always treats Jane Eyre as an encumbrance inferior to a maid and takes her as a doll to show her hypocritical generosity. Eventually one day, little Jane had an argument with her cousin and was beaten. After being locked in a room for a night, Jane was ill and at that time, her early feminism came out. In the face of Mrs. Reed, Jane refuses to be treated as an inferior being and finally speaks out against discriminations to her with sharp and cold exposure. When Mrs. Reed reproaches Jane for telling a lie out of all reason, Jane defends herself perversely: "I'm not deceitful. If I were, I should say I loved you, but I declare, I don't love you. I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed, and this book about the liar, you may give to your girl, Georgiana, for it is she who tells lies, and not I" (Bronte, 2002, p.63).

In other people's opinion, Jane should be great thankful to her aunt rather than being rude. When Jane is about to leave Gateshead to the charity school, Mrs. Reed thinks she can make Jane frightened by her status and decides to give a hypocritical and sanctimonious talk to guide Jane to express gratitude in front of Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary. But Jane refuses to be this rich lady's doll, being treated as unemotional and shameless. She retorts back straightly and powerfully:

"How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I? Because it is the truth. You think I had no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness, but I can't live so, and you have no pity. I shall remember how you push me back-roughly and violently pushed me back into the red room, and locked me up there-to my dying day. Though I was in pain, though I cried out, have mercy! Have mercy, Aunt Reed!" (Bronte, 2002, p.64)

Jane's rebellion against Mrs. Reed and John represents her feminist consciousness in getting esteem from other people as a decent and respectable person.

Then little Jane was sent to Lowood boarding school where she learnt a lot and became much stronger and independence. During Jane Eyre's staying in the orphanage of Lowood, which is a benevolent institution in name, but a hell in fact, her understanding of esteem becomes deeper. She is aware of a fact that, even in the face of powerful and authoritative people like the chief inspector of this charity school, Brocklehurst, as long as her esteem and dignity hurt ruthlessly, she will never submit but rebel against it decidedly.

B. *Pursuit for Esteem*

The whole time spending in Thornfield is the most splendid part of the whole book. Meeting with Rochester and fell in love with him reflected the feminism in Jane and her new thoughts. Jane loves Rochester with all her heart and Rochester's status and wealth make him so high above for Jane to approach, yet she never feels herself inferior to Rochester though she is a humble family teacher. She believes they are fair and should respect each other. In fact, it is her uprightness, loftiness and sincerity that touch Rochester. Rochester feels from the bottom of his heart that Jane is the spiritual partner he always longs for. When the heroine is moved by his whole-heartedness, they fall in love deeply. But at the time of their wedding, she finds the fact that Rochester has had a legal wife. Jane feels heartbreaking on this news, and it makes her trapped in a dilemma whether to stay or to leave. She says to Rochester:

"I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself. I will keep the law given by God, sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by men when I was sane, and not mad as I am now, laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation, they are for such moments as this when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor, stringent are they, inviolate they shall be." (Bronte, 2002, p.343)

Although she had a deep affection for Rochester, she could not stand any compromise in her marriage. She is the whole one and cannot be laughed or argued by others in this aspect. She wouldn't give up her independence and self-respect. So she chose to leave her beloved one and wanted to make a new life.

As the end is known to all, Jane returns to Ferndean Manor and marries Rochester. Mr. Rochester then loses sight of both eyes and disabled. But in this circumstance, Jane Eyre comes back to Mr. Rochester caring for nothing but this man. She says: "I find you lonely, I will be your companion, to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master; you shall not be left desolate, so long as I live" (Bronte, 2002, p.310).

Jane Eyre does not think that she is making a sacrifice. She says: "I love the people I love is that to make a sacrifice? If so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice" (Bronte, 2002, p.451). In most people's eyes, nobody would like to marry a man who loses his sight and most of his wealth. But as to Jane, she is different. In her mind, pure love is the meeting of hearts and minds of two people.

Jane Eyre is unique in Victorian period. As a feminist woman, she represents the insurgent women eager for esteem.

Without esteem from other people, women like Jane can not get the real emancipation.

C. Pursuit for True Love

In all Jane Eyre's life, the pursuit of true love is an important representation of her struggle for self-realization. Love in Jane Eyre's understanding is pure, divine and it cannot be measured by status, power or property and so on. Having experienced a helpless childhood and a miserable adolescence, she expects more than a consolable true love. She suffers a lot in her pursuit of true love. Meanwhile, she obtains it through her long and hard pursuit.

During this period, Jane covered her name and wanted to make a new living. Being a teacher in a small village, she made friends with John and his sisters. Though John is a handsome guy and he proposed to Jane, she cannot accept him, this is the reflection of her iron determination in pursuing true love. In a word, she does not want an affectionless love. A decent and handsome man as John is, Jane Eyre cannot accept him because his love would be "one of duty, not of passion" (Terry, 1987, p.29). She knows clearly that humiliated marriage is not true love. He makes an offer of marriage to Jane only because he thinks that Jane Eyre is a good choice for a missionary's wife. He finds Jane Eyre docile, firm and tenacious. Because he just needs this kind of assistant. Jane says if she joins St. John, she is abandoning half herself and if she goes to India, she is going to premature death. Jane Eyre insists that true love should be based on equality, mutual understanding and respect. So she refuses John's proposal.

Jane is in great unconformity with the social environment at that time. She dares to fight against the conventional marriage ideas, which well reflects all feminists' voice and wish for a true love. Maybe Jane's choices are considered something shocking, but it really gives a blow to the Victorian society.

V. CONCLUSION

Charlotte Bronte is the eldest of the three Bronte sisters whose novels have become enduring classics of English literature. Jane Eyre is widely acclaimed as her masterpiece. Bronte sisters grew up in a poor priestly family. Their mother died of lung cancer when they were very young. Their father taught them reading at home. As a priest, Mr Bronte went around to spread gospel and the family had to move to a new, isolated place. The children's childhood was desolate and without joy. Also, the children were sent to a charity school, where the living conditions were bad. Unfortunately, the two little young sisters died of tuberculosis. The miserable childhood life also exhibited in novel. As they grew up, the Bronte sisters made a living by teaching in a private school. These experiences offered the available materials for the prospective creation.

Charlotte Bronte depicts Jane Eyre's image through three steps. The first step is her feminism thought starts to sprout from her fighting to her poor child life. The second step is her feminism thought shapes from the miserable experiences in boarding school, where she comes to understand that the survival of the fittest. The impressive part is the third step of her pursuit for true love, independence and equality, where the feminism thought grows to mature. The growth of Jane Eyre mirrors the growing up of Charlotte Bronte.

Jane Eyre's uncompromising pursuit for esteem leaves a deep impression on every reader of *Jane Eyre*. She struggles for equality on economy, and marriage. Her love is based on equality and independence that has nothing to do with status, power or property. She is not tempted by money and does not want to be a mistress of Rochester for money. Her love is loyal and steadfast. Jane Eyre aspires after true love and she overcomes the obstacles in the process of pursuing true love. At last, she succeeds and lives a happy life with her lover.

Through the detailed analysis of Jane Eyre's struggle for self-realization, it is known that whatever difficulties one encounters in his life, never be a quitter is the only way that one can do. Jane Eyre proves to the world of the 1800s that a woman beating the odds to become independent and successful on her own was not as far-fetched as it may have seemed.

Jane goes against the expected type by "refusing subservience, disagreeing with her superiors, standing up for her rights, and venturing creative thoughts" (Margaret, 1997, p. 325-346). She is not only successful in terms of wealth and position, but more importantly, in terms of family and love. These two needs that have evaded Jane for so long are finally hers. Adding to her victory is her ability to enjoy both without losing her hard-won independence. Everybody has the rights to pursue happiness, to pursue the true spirit of life, which can be seen from Jane Eyre's struggle for independence and equality.

Jane Eyre's story tells us that in a man-dominated society, a woman should strive for the decency and dignity. In face of hardships in life, the courageous woman should be brave enough to battle against it. Self-esteem is the primary element to protect. And the feminism taught how to defend ourselves. Whenever we are helpless in the bad conditions, we should try to survive the life. As to a happy marriage, a certain amount of fortune is necessary. A woman with a little dowry is basic for a match. While as to the lover, the independence and equality as a human is the first task. Marriage without love is lifeless, therefore, a perfect match is based on love, equality in status and a good fortune.

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